

Student Involvement in the Grading Process

Susan L. MILLER*

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It has long been accepted that students need to be actively involved in the learning process when studying another language. This is reflected through group and pair work activities which create a learner-centered rather than teacher-centered environment. One area in which it has been generally more difficult to get the students directly involved is in the grading process. This paper will report on one experiment to involve students in the grading process and will assess the results of that attempt, as well as consider the question of whether or not it is a good idea to give students responsibility in this area.

Background

According to David Nunan, "in a learner-centered curriculum model both teachers and learners need to be involved in evaluation."¹⁾ He goes on to state that "self-assessment by learners can be an important supplement to teacher assessment and ... self-assessment provides one of the most effective means of developing both critical self-awareness of what it is to be a learner, and skills in learning how to learn."²⁾ Yet as a teacher, it is often difficult to surrender the reins of power to the students when it comes to grading. Several questions come to mind: will the students all want to give themselves A's even if they sleep in class and don't do their homework? Are they willing to be honest and fair with themselves and with each other? Thinking back to my days as a college student, how important was getting a good grade to me? Was I willing to make the effort for that grade? If I had had the power to give myself a grade, would I have been honest and fair? If I, in turn, give the students power when it comes to the grading process, will that increase their effort to learn, or encourage them to be lax, knowing that they have a say? While all of the above are valid questions which express natural and practical fears, these concerns can be overcome by trial and error, and by gradually incorporating ways for students to assess and evaluate their own progress.

Another advantage to self-assessment which Nunan aptly points out is that in addition to evaluating their own progress, students should be encouraged to give feedback on the classroom activities themselves. This will help students to identify their own learning styles and what they like and don't like about the way they are being taught. As Nunan puts it, students "can be involved in evaluating most aspects of the curriculum, including their own progress, the objectives of the course, the materials and learning activities used, the learning modes and so on."³⁾

While these are noble ideas, often it is difficult to know where to begin in terms of encouraging student self-evaluation and involvement in the grading process. For this reason, I would like to outline one project which I conducted which incorporated student-involvement in many ways. Both self and peer-evaluation were aspects of this, and the results may prove helpful to other

* Department of Foreign Language

teachers hoping to involve students in assessment and grading.

The Project

Oftentimes videotapes of movies are used in the classroom these days as an effective learning tool. In addition, student projects are being videotaped more and more to provide them with feedback on their ability to use a foreign language. I began to wonder about taking this process one step further and giving the students the ability to create videotapes of their own. My hope was that this would enable them to use English in a situation which would be stimulating for them and would also hold them accountable since they would need to produce a final videotape.

a. Who the Students were and Requirements for the Project

The project began in October, 1992, with my freshman class of English majors at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan. There were approximately thirty-two students in the class, and the students were divided into eight groups. Each group chose a topic for their videotape. The only requirements were that English had to be spoken and the videotape had to have a purpose. The tape did not have to have social or political significance, nor was research necessary, though students were welcome to do research if they wished. Prior to the initiation of this project, the students had done group presentations on AIDS using some type of visual aid, such as a poster, so they were familiar with group work as well as presenting information to the class. We had focused on making eye contact, voice projection, and cooperation as a group.

As a class, we had also discussed various terms regarding grading, including subjective grading, objective grading, peer evaluation, cooperative versus competitive learning, and so on. These terms were difficult for the students to understand, and were even a bit frightening for them at first, but gradually the students got comfortable with both the terms and with having a voice in their own grading process.

b. Student Involvement in Establishing Criteria for Grading

As this was a new and experimental project for me, I was unsure of what to expect and of what the pitfalls would be. From the beginning, I tried to involve the students in helping to mold and shape what the video projects would become. For example, I asked the students several questions before we began on how we should evaluate the videotapes. The end product was important, but after all the students themselves were not film majors and this was a first for them as well. With their input, we decided on evaluating both the process of making the videotape, and the result (the actual videotape). The students came up with the criteria for both of these categories. Some of the factors important for the making of the videotape or the process included cooperation among the group members, attendance, and a willingness to use English. For the actual videotape, important features were divided into two categories: the Contents of the Video and the Means of Expression. The Contents included things like story line, composition, music, lighting, and location, while the Means of Expression included voice quality, eye contact, body language, and acting. (For a full description of the criteria for making and evaluating the video, please refer to Appendix A.)

c. *The Video Journal*

Each group of students was given a notebook in which to record in detail the process of making the video called the Video Journal. Every member of the group had to take a turn at writing in the journal. They also had to take roll for their group, and record it in the journal. Excessive absences by any member of the group could seriously endanger the project, and in fact one group had to disband and combine with another group for precisely that reason. The students whose group fell apart who had attended were disappointed that they could not complete their project as planned.

This project required a great deal of motivation and self-discipline on the part of the students. As previously mentioned, they had to think of their own subject, in addition to making a plan for completing the project on time, devising a script, and shooting and editing the video. Often they wound up working in the library or elsewhere during class time. This made actual classroom management a challenge. If I was working with one group, I was not able to make sure that the other groups were speaking English or focusing on the task at hand. The video journals were meant to help keep me informed, but often they were not as detailed as I would have liked. While I read the journals regularly, I did not comment in them until the end, and some of the students reported they would have liked more feedback sooner. I tended to speak to each group personally and ask how they were doing or if they needed any help, rather than write in the journals. Now I believe that on-going comments and more detailed follow-through would have been beneficial for all of us, as the concepts of self and peer-evaluation were new for them, and it was my first time administering such a task.

d. *The Video Review Sheet*

When the videotapes were finished and the magic day for screening arrived (it actually took two days), I prepared a Video Review Sheet based upon the criterion established at the beginning of the project. (See Appendix B.) Each student was able to evaluate each video. The members of the group which made the video identified themselves as the creators and then provided comments and an evaluation for reflective purposes. After I looked over the evaluations by the class, I submitted them to each respective group for review so that they would know what their classmates thought of their video. I found the students to be candid in their evaluations. One group had had a good idea for a video, but had lost sight of their purpose while producing the video, and most of the students were aware of this and commented on it.

e. *The "Video Project Feedback" Form*

Finally, a Video Project Feedback form was created after we were all finished in order to get the students input on this particular project. (See Appendix C.) In some cases there were conflicting opinions. For example, deciding upon a topic or theme for the video was a major challenge for all of the groups. However, the reaction to this challenge was mixed: some of the students loved it and others didn't. Moreover, as it was our first time to try such a project difficulties arose which together we had to try to solve. In spite of this, however, all of the students except for two enjoyed the project, and all but for four recommended doing the project again. While in all honesty many students admitted they did not use English enough in making the video, all but three felt it was an effective strategy for learning English and they gave their reasons why. Cooperation and adopting

diverse ideas was one of the favorite aspects of making the video, and while there had been some fear and trepidation at first regarding self and peer-evaluation, that also proved to be a highlight. Only two students were dissatisfied with the method of evaluation, and some of the positive comments were:

It was impartial and fair.

I got various impressions and opinions.

I learned my weak points and my positive points.

It is good to include my own opinion in grading.

One student, although he or she liked the system, ultimately did not understand the standard for self-evaluation and felt that the teacher was able to be the fairest. The students also provided tremendous feedback on all of the questions asked, including the difficulties they encountered, and how they felt the project could be improved.

Conclusion

Therefore, as a result of this experience I believe that students can be counted on to be honest and fair in evaluating their own performances in class. Moreover, giving them some responsibility for their own learning is often a new and exciting experience for them. One of my major concerns was whether or not I had given my students too much responsibility since they were first-year English majors and many of them had not used English extensively in class before. In some ways I think more guidance on my part would have been helpful, especially now that I know what some of the pitfalls were. Nevertheless, involving the students in every step of the way proved to be a tremendous advantage for everyone involved. For me in many ways this project was risky and challenging and I wondered if the time was being well-spent. Yet if one never takes a risk or reaches out in a new direction it is impossible to know what the possibilities are. As I learned, gently involving students in the grading process let them know that I trusted them and their opinions, and this in turn led them to trust themselves as well as each other. Giving them a voice and some responsibility for their own learning, while holding them accountable for what they were doing, proved to be very rewarding.

Notes

1. David Nunan. *The learner-Centered Curriculum*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 116.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

Bibliography

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Appendix A

The Video Project

The purpose of our video project is to enable you to use English effectively within your group, to communicate with others, and to be able to see the results of your work with a completed final project. In addition, you will be keeping a journal of your activities so that a) I will know how you are spending your time and some of the pitfalls you encountered as well as the good things that happened, and b) you will have the opportunity to record your actions and reflect upon the process. When you write in the journal consider the following questions:

1. Did our group members speak English ?
2. Did we cooperate with each other ?
3. Was every group member present ?
4. Did each member contribute equally ?
5. What exactly did we do ? (How did we spend our time ?)
6. What were some funny or interesting things that happened ?
7. What difficulties or troubles did we encounter ?
8. Any additional comments.

When you write in your journal please be as descriptive as possible.

Last week we brainstormed about grading this project, and I have received feedback from you. Based upon what you want and my own feelings, the project will be graded as follows:

A. The Process 50%

The process involves the steps you take to complete this project. For example:

Did you work hard ?

Did you have a positive attitude ?

Did all members participate equally ?

Did you cooperate with one another ? Teamwork ?

Did you make an effort to speak English, not just in filming the actual video but in all the planning stages ?

Are you satisfied with the work you did or do you think you could have done a better job ? If so, why ?

What areas could you have improved upon ? What aspects of the task were difficult for you ?

This PROCESS grade will be assigned 30% by you and 20% by me. I will use your video journals in making my assessment as well as my observations of you at work. You will make an assessment of yourself and your other group members based upon your own participation in the project. Honesty counts. The point here is not to criticize anyone negatively, but to give positive feedback on how each person can become a better, more active language learner.

B. The Result 50%

The result is the actual video that you produced. Factors which are important here include:

I. The Contents of the Video

Story

Composition

Music

Lighting

Location

BGM

Is it interesting ?

Is it a fine piece of work ?

Is it useful for us ? Did we learn something ?

Is the content well arranged ?

Is the work suitable for the topic ? Did they accomplish their goal ?

II. The Means of Expression

Voice quality (speaking loudly and clearly)

Eye contact
 Body language
 Were the actors and actresses tense?
 Were they easy to understand?
 Did they use appropriate English?
 Is every group member in the video?
 How is the acting?
 Do they attract the audience?
 How much can we concentrate on it?

This RESULT grade will be assigned 20% by me and 30% by your classmates. Everyone except the members of the group that produced the video will grade the group. We will all judge by the standards set out above to ensure fairness, and everyone will be honest. Each person's opinion will count for the same amount, and the scores will be averaged. Finally, the PROCESS and the RESULT grade will be combined to give you a final score. I will give you a total of 40% of your grade, you will give yourselves 30% of your grade, and your classmates (the critics) will give you 30% of your grade. If other teachers and my other class get to watch the video, I will give you their feedback *and it will/but it will not* formally be included in the grade.

I will be observing each group do their work at different times, and I may even want to come on location with you or videotape your group in action. I will set up a schedule with each of you.

The deadline for this project will be _____
 Good Luck!

Appendix B

Video Review Sheet

Name of Group: _____ Subject of Video: _____
Evaluation of Contents: (1 = poor; 10 = superb)

composition
 music/bgm
 lighting
 location
 is it interesting?
 is it a fine piece of work?
 did we learn something?
 is the content well arranged?
 did they accomplish their goal?

Evaluation of Expression: (1 = poor, 10 = superb)

voice quality (speaking loudly and clearly)
 eye contact
 body language
 were the actors and actresses tense?
 were they easy to understand?
 did they use appropriate English?
 is every group member in the video?
 how is the acting?

Additional Comments:

Appendix C (2 pages)

Video Project Feedback

As you know, this is the first time that I have had my students make video projects. Please take some time to fill out this questionnaire, so that I can improve upon the video projects.

1. I enjoyed/did not enjoy making the video project because
2. I used/did not use English enough while making the video project because
3. Some difficulties I encountered were
4. The positive points about making the video were
5. I liked/did not like the system of grading involving self-evaluation, peer-evaluation and teacher evaluation because
6. Using the mixing room was easy/difficult because
7. Getting the video camera when we needed it was sometimes/always/never a problem.
8. The hardest part about making the video was
9. The best part about making the video was
10. This project could be improved by
11. I recommend/do not recommend that Susan does the video project again because
12. This was/was not an effective technique for using and learning about English as well as producing something memorable and of interest to us. Why or why not?
13. Any additional comments that you have would be greatly appreciated.

I've really enjoyed having all of you in my class! Thanks for all of your hard work and kindness to me and good luck next year!